

MEIGS, MONTGOMERY

DRAWER 98

GENERAL UNION

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Civil War Officers Union

Montgomery C. Meigs

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
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1758 Wendell Avenue
Schenectady 8, New York
December 13, 1944

Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Lincoln Lore
The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company
Fort Wayne, Indiana

Dear Sir:

I have been interested in reading some of your Lincoln Lore, particularly leaflet Number 798, which discusses Lincoln's relations with McClellan. You will be interested in the enclosed copy of an anecdote* told me by my uncle, Colonel J. R. M. Taylor, U.S.A. retired, who in turn was told it more than once by General Montgomery C. Meigs, as your memorandum states.

Very truly yours,

P. L. Alger



PLA:RS

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Josiah Meigs, first President of the University of Georgia, had nine children, of whom Charles Delucena Meigs was the fifth. He was born in Bermuda, just 150 years ago, ~~less 10 days.~~ Charles grew up at Athens, Georgia, a few miles from an Indian reservation occupied by various tribes of Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws, all under the direction of his uncle, Return Jonathan Meigs, who was the Indian agent. He married Mary Montgomery in 1815, took up the study of medicine, and established himself in practice in Philadelphia in 1817, where he was a leader of his profession for 50 years. An industrious student, he was the master of many languages. He distinguished himself by his services in the great cholera epidemic in the thirties, and was one of the last doctors who did not believe in germs. He debated the subject with Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, but the death of one of his patients after an operation convinced him of his error, and caused him to retire from practice. In his family Bible he wrote a note to his children saying "My desire is that you should carefully preserve, each one of you, the record of our family. If all men could be induced to preserve their family records, discarding without mercy every member of their blood line whose conduct might stain it, society would derive great security, and nature a strong support from that course."

Dr. Meigh' eldest son, Montgomery Cunningham Meigs, was born in Georgia, in 1816, and grew up in Philadelphia in the days of wood fuel, tallow candles,

and sperm oil lamps. He was graduated from West Point in 1836, and was appointed to the First Artillery, but transferred to the Engineers' Corps in 1837. His first service was as Second Lieutenant of Engineers under Captain Robert E. Lee, in the improvement of the Mississippi and Delaware Rivers. From 1840 to 1852 he was engaged in constructing Forts Wayne, Porter, Niagara, Ontario and Montgomery at various points along the Great Lakes, living for some time in Detroit, which was then the capital of Michigan, with 10,000 population. In 1852 he was ordered to Washington to undertake the construction of a water supply system. His plans having been approved by Congress, he constructed the Potomac aqueduct, 11 miles long, over the Rock Creek and Cabin John bridges, which provided Washington with 70 million gallons of water daily through a nine foot water main. The Cabin John bridge, with its 220 foot span, is the longest stone/^{arch}bridge in the world, and its successful completion gave him a high standing in the engineering world. In Washington, also, he was in charge of construction of the wings of the capitol and the completion of the capitol dome. It was argued that the dome could not support the great figure which now surmounts it, but Meigs installed it without mishap.

In the autumn of 1860, Captain Meigs was sent to Florida to construct Fort Jefferson, but he was recalled to Washington in time for the inauguration of President

Lincoln, whom he then met for the first time. In April Lincoln ordered him to relieve Fort Pickens, near Pensacola, then threatened by the Confederates, a task which he completed safely, marking the first active step on the Union side to oppose Confederate aggression.

Meanwhile the Quartermaster General and many other high army officers had left for the South. Lincoln, impressed by what he had seen of Meigs, asked him to take charge of the Quartermaster Department. Meigs replied he did not have the rank. Lincoln appointed him a colonel on May 14, over the objection of General Cameron, and the following day promoted him to the rank of brigadier and Quartermaster General.

Throughout the Civil War, General Meigs was responsible for the equipment and supply of the armies in the field, moving vast bodies of soldiers over long routes, collecting a fleet of over 1,000 transport vessels, building and operating railways and telegraph lines, constructing a squadron of River Iron Clads for use by the armies of the West, and finally returning a million and a quarter men to their homes at the close of the war. These operations required the expenditure of 1957 million dollars, all so well accounted for, that the most painstaking efforts of post-war scandal seekers could not uncover a discrepancy of a single cent.

General Allen, in charge of the Quartermaster Department of the Mississippi, wrote "History furnishes few, if any, examples of armies so great, traversing territories so wide, and having had every want, and every step, supplied. It demonstrates how vital to the success of military operations is an efficient Quartermaster's Department; a department that it has long since become a habit to abuse. Every officer and every private constitutes himself its accuser and judge. No failure in this department escapes the argus eyes of censure, or the prolific tongues of reproof. It is not only accountable for its own sins, but is the great scapegoat upon which blundering generals park their own errors. In view of these facts, it is a proud reflection for the Department in the West that its faults subject to this ordeal were 'past finding out'."

General Meigs was a close adviser of the President throughout the war. He it was who first suggested an organization to provide humane care for prisoners, and he also suggested the location of the Arlington National Cemetery. An anecdote of a meeting of the cabinet in 1862, after the battle of Antietam, told by General Meigs, to his grandson, more than once, throws an interesting light on the history of that crucial time. Following the battle, General McClellan had camped on the banks of the Potomac without moving for 6 weeks. President Lincoln became very concerned about the lack of progress and the mounting expenses of the Union Army. He held a

cabinet meeting to review the situation, and called General Meigs in to report on the state of supplies for the army. Lincoln asked very specifically what supplies General McClellan had asked for, and whether he had received them. General Meigs read off a long list of requisitions for horses, blankets, clothing, and military supplies of all sorts, which McClellan had placed, and reported that every one of them had been filled without delay. The President then turned to the cabinet and said:-

"You see, gentlemen, he has had everything he has asked for, and he has done nothing. The bottom will drop out of the pot if we continue this situation with the tremendous cost that is counting up. We can not carry on any longer. The bottom will drop out of the pot if we do not do something!"

He then turned to Secretary Stanton and said "Make out an order in my name relieving General McClellan of his command."

On only two occasions during the war did any Union Army suffer for want of supplies. General Rosecrans's army, after Chickamauga, lost control of its long communication lines for a time, and many of his horses and mules perished, while the soldiers had scant rations. When General Sherman's army reached Savannah, the Quartermaster's fleet with supplies was waiting at the mouth of the river, but was delayed for several days until the

channel could be opened. Many years later Napoleon III asked General Sheridan to tell him of the marvelous methods of supply of the Union Armies at such great distances from their bases.

In a personal letter written about 1884, General Meigs said: "Many military names from the war will live in history, but Lincoln's and Stanton's will outlive all but Grant's. These three are the great men of the war. I knew them all during its course. They differed in talents, in temperament, and in manner. Lincoln is easily first, Grant, with Stanton, occupied the second place. I will not attempt to say which of these two should be first. But all won my regard and such reverence as I have felt called on to give to no other man in the course of a long life, in which I have shaken hands with every president since Adams, that is, with sixteen of the twenty-one men who have held that high office. Between Lincoln, Stanton, and Grant, I believe there was never a dispute."

The esteem of his associates for General Meigs is indicated by an endorsement written on one of his reports by General Sherman. "The handwriting of this report is that of General Meigs, and I, therefore, approve of it, but I cannot read it."

Besides the vast sums spent during the war, General Meigs expended over 10 million dollars on public works, and adjudicated 40 million dollars of claims on the government by citizens of the border states, so that this total expenditures in the service of the United States aggregated

almost exactly two billion dollars.

After the war, General Meigs became a leading figure in all the planning and building that went on in Washington. He invented a self-adjusting candle, built the old Pension Building, was a regent of the Smithsonian Institute, and a member of the Academy of Sciences. He recorded all he saw in shorthand notes and freehand sketches or water colors, his study being lined with these reminders of his travels. He visited Europe twice after the war, carrying with him a letter of introduction from Secretary of State Seward which said in part:-

"The prevailing opinion of this country sustains a firm conviction which I entertain, and on all occasions cheerfully express, that without the services of this eminent soldier, the national cause must either have been lost or deeply imperilled in the late Civil War."

Montgomery Meigs was one of the very first army officers who was also a scientist, his career marking the transition from the old days of marching men to the highly mechanized warfare of these days. He was distinguished almost equally for his contributions in peace and in war. Let us hope that the military scientists of the present war will equally apply their talents to peaceful purposes at a later date, in the tradition General Meigs so well laid down.

PLAlger:RS

Schenectady, February 9

